

THE PROBLEM OF AUTHENTICITY
IN AMERICAN ART

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THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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As a field of scholarship, American art has an increasing importance. First and most obviously, it is our own art. In adding to our knowledge of it we are contributing to our artistic heritage and to that sense of having roots in the past that is essential to the growth of a mature culture.

It is a field that has been much less explored than most historic periods. The scholarly study of American art, in any modern sense, began only about twenty years ago with research on colonial and early republican portrait-painting. This period presents certain peculiarly knotty problems. Contemporary records are extremely meagre. The chief biographical source, William Dunlap, only mentions some of the most important early figures such as Feke, Blackburn, Earl, Badger and William Rush. Many early portraits are unsigned and even the names of their sitters are unknown. Add to this that family legend is apt to be more misleading than helpful. Before the days of modern criticism the tendency was to ascribe an unsigned picture to the most famous artist to whom it bore any resemblance; thus any pre-Revolutionary portrait of a severe realistic type became a Copley. At first this was quite innocent, but more recently the faker has entered the scene with his forged signatures, his repaintings and his fictitious pedigrees.

The expert on early American art has not had an easy time. In the absence of signatures or documentary evidence he has had to ascribe pictures on purely stylistic grounds,

often with few other examples of the artist's work for comparison. Sometimes he has had to bodily reconstruct an unknown painter on the basis of a few pictures of similar style. Some of the best efforts of American scholarship have been devoted to solving these problems. As a result of the exact and critical labors of our scholars, the knowledge of our artistic beginnings is immeasurably greater today than it was a few years ago. There is still much original research to be done in this period. What is needed now is more intensive study of individual figures, combined with a broader analysis of their relations one to another. As it is, however, the period has been more thoroughly studied than any in our history.

The succeeding period, from about 1820 to the Civil War, has until recently been neglected by students. It witnessed the decline of the colonial dependence on England and the growth of an independent national spirit. It produced our first native landscape school, the Hudson River school, and the first painters of the American social scene. It was the most strongly native phase of our art until the present day, and for that very reason it was looked down upon by the more cosmopolitan generation that followed. Only recently have we rediscovered these pioneer painters of American landscape and manners, and come to appreciate their originality and vigor and their high degree of artistry. The period has now attracted the attention of several able explorers. Its docu-

mentation is much more extensive than that of colonial times, but the great difficulty is to trace pictures which have been out of fashion for a century.

The artists of the post-Civil-War period, including such famous figures as Whistler, Inness, LaFarge, Homer, Eakins, Ryder, Sargent and St. Gaudens, can scarcely be said to have been neglected. Books have been written on all of them — several in some cases. These books have been chiefly biographical and appreciative. In only a few cases have they included what is essential if a book is to be ranked as a scholarly contribution — a complete record of the artist's work. This is not meant to minimize the personal element. It is always important to know an artist's life, his relations to society, his ideas, his finances. But the essential thing, the thing that will outlive any amount of personalia, is his work. To record his work, to locate it, to describe it, to separate the genuine from the spurious, is one of the greatest services that a biographer can perform. The writer's opinions may not be valid in fifty years, but his record will stand. Such a record is the most enduring monument that can be raised to an artist.

For relatively few Americans has this been done — mostly the early portraitists. There are many excellent books on American artists, but few of them contain catalogues of their work. The truth is that we have only recently begun to apply to our artists the scholarly methods that have long been com-

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mon in Europe. Practically every leading French or English artist of the nineteenth century has been the subject of this kind of study.

The need for such records is emphasized by a large and growing number of forgeries. That early portraits have occasionally been forged or much repainted or falsely signed, is fairly well known; but few people even in the art world are aware of the extent of faking in more recent American art. Increasing interest in our art combined with lack of adequate scholarship has made America the faker's paradise.

The outstanding victim is our greatest romanticist, Albert Ryder. Ryder painted few pictures, probably no more than a hundred and fifty. He worked a long time on each and his creative period was short. The rarity of his pictures, their consequent high value, and the fact that they look easy to imitate, attracted fakers from the first. Like Corot he was forged while still alive, in his old age when he was producing little and his pictures were fetching good prices. Since his death the business has become a major industry, until today, on a conservative estimate, there must be at least four or five times as many pseudo-Ryders as genuine ones. It is depressing to note how stereotyped the fakes have become in recent years — always the same lone boat on the same moonlit sea — although as a matter of fact Ryder painted this subject comparatively seldom. In this avalanche of fakes the real Ryder has been completely lost. Even the fakers have forgotten

what he is like; they are copying each other now. One of the most necessary tasks of American scholarship, in which the writer is now engaged, under the auspices of the Whitney Museum of American Art, is that of rediscovering the real Ryder and restoring him to his rightful position in American art.

Sharing Ryder's characteristics, Blakelock has been a victim of the same kind of treatment, aggravated by the fact that insanity kept him from painting during his last twenty years, while his pictures were rising in value. Such conditions were too tempting to the faking gentry and the production of Blakelocks has not been far behind that of Ryders.

Rarity and a style that looks easy to copy are not the only qualities conducive to forgery. Winslow Homer would seem to be the last man to attract the faker; he was extremely prolific and every picture bears his unmistakable energetic touch. But his high prices were the determining factor. In the course of writing a book on Homer I have examined no less than three hundred pictures signed "Homer" which he obviously never saw.

The popular and prolific Inness has also been widely faked. Homer Martin was given the posthumous honor of being imitated immediately after his death. Even the publicity accorded to every new picture by Whistler has not entirely prevented their number from increasing since his death. In fact it is difficult to name a single famous American who is immune. As soon as an artist's work reaches a certain monetary level, the underworld of art gets busy. I have visited the

home of a notorious "collector" who claimed to own sixty Homers, fifty Ryders, twenty Whistlers and no less than a hundred and twenty-five Sargents. Of several hundred pictures he showed me about a dozen, mostly contemporary, bore evidence of genuineness.

Fakes fall into two main classes. First, deliberate forgeries. Most "Ryders," "Blakelocks," "Whistlers," "Innesses" and "Martins" — artists of highly individual styles — are of this type. Often they are copies or adaptations of well-known pictures, especially those frequently reproduced, or in museums where they can be easily studied.

It cannot be said that many of these posthumous works are particularly impressive. Most fakers seem to be extremely unskillful artists or rank amateurs. Seldom have they studied the style of their originals closely enough to do really baffling imitations. The Homer fakers have never learned to draw. The forgers of Ryder and Blakelock try to duplicate their rich and complex glazes by the shortcut of simple opaque painting smothered in yellow varnish. In trying to add verisimilitude to their products they generally use old canvases, but they neglect to clean off the paintings underneath, so that the x-ray discloses some strange phenomena. I have seen a "Ryder" moonlit marine superimposed on an elegant young lady with a parasol and a poodle, in the general style of Alfred Stevens. In fact, the outstanding characteristic of American fakers is their stupidity. Rarely

does one find an example of their art on as high a professional level as the best work of their French, Italian and German colleagues. This may sound unpatriotic, but the truth must be told.

The second type of fakes consists of works by minor painters of about the same time, bearing a general resemblance to the better-known artist's style and needing only a forged signature. Sometimes they are interesting in their own right; more often they are pure rubbish. Many pseudo-Homers are of this type, and a more dreary group of tenth-rate pictures it would be hard to imagine.

The faker's ideal victim is the nouveau riche with money to spend, a yearning for art, and no experience. These innocents are the main support of the too numerous band of unscrupulous dealers who specialize in fakes. Statistics on this traffic are naturally not obtainable, but it must run into millions annually.

But the inexperienced are not the only victims. Many of our biggest museums, our leading private collectors, our most prominent dealers, have been taken in. These institutions and individuals, who would not think of acquiring old masters without thorough examination and expert opinion, have frequently bought American art with an utter lack of critical sense. There are few museums in the country which at one time or another have not owned or exhibited fake American art. For example, several museums celebrated the recent centenary of

Homer's birth by exhibitions. Among the largest shows, one included two fakes, one three, and one no less than six.

Nor do the critics help much to clarify the situation. Some years ago a dealer exhibited pictures supposedly by a leading American painter of the late nineteenth century; out of over twenty works, only four could be considered unquestionably genuine. It is a sad reflection on our critics' eyesight that not a single one hinted that there was anything dubious about the show, and most of them praised it to the skies.

The remedy for this situation is more and better scholarship. Nothing is so calculated to deter fakers as complete and accurate records of our artists' works. The relative fewness of forgeries of Thomas Eakins, for example, as compared to his contemporaries, can be largely ascribed to the existence of a catalogue of his pictures prepared with the collaboration of his family and pupils.

To compile such a record means thorough and exhaustive research. The colonial expert may be hampered by a dearth of source material, but the student of a later period is embarrassed by the wealth of it. The published material, in books, magazines, newspapers, and catalogues of exhibitions and auctions, is enormous. When all these sources have been searched and all references to pictures noted, comes the task of tracing works to their present owners, examining and recording them, securing photographs.

A certain proportion of these works, because of unim-

peachable provenance, can be accepted as obviously authentic. They form a nucleus for comparison with those whose history is incomplete. To the expert eye most of the latter can be fairly easily classified as sheep or goats. But there is always a minority of puzzling examples which have to be examined with x-ray, microscope and other scientific methods. The more experience he has, the more the honest expert comes to distrust the value of "first impressions" and to rely on thorough laboratory examination. In extreme cases like those of Ryder and Blakelock, the majority of their unquestioned works will have to be examined by such methods to build up a body of technical data by which border-line cases can be judged.

Only on the basis of such thorough knowledge of individual style can questions of authenticity be decided. The day is past when an expert can adequately cover all American art. This is a day of specialists who know a single period or a few artists but know them thoroughly. Until recently we have had too little of this intensive individual research in American art. Our scholars have tried to cover too much territory. We have had too many amateur experts and snap judgments.

The problem, however, has grown beyond the control of individual scholars. They have done excellent work, but they are handicapped by lack of research assistance, of facilities for scientific examinations, and above all by lack of understanding on the part of museums, collectors, dealers and the public. Their efforts are too individualistic to be really

effective. The time has come for a larger cooperative effort.

The Whitney Museum of American Art proposes the following: that the museums, acting in cooperation, should sponsor a central bureau for authenticating American art. To this bureau anyone — collectors, dealers, the public, and the museums themselves — could submit works, and the bureau would have them passed on by experts. These experts, who would be those best qualified to judge particular artists or periods, would in most cases be outside the bureau. The bureau itself would not try to pass on works unless members of its staff should be especially qualified to do so. It would act more often as a clearing-house than as a court of judgment.

The bureau would have the use of a museum laboratory and a staff of research assistants. Besides helping experts in examining particular works, it could conduct general research. One of the chief handicaps to scholarship is the amount of routine labor it involves. For all but the most fortunately situated scholars, such exhaustive research applied to an individual artist is out of the question. But if spread out over many artists and handled by a central agency, this research would be entirely feasible. Selecting the leading American figures who have not been adequately studied, the bureau could collect full data on their work. It could make a systematic search of all publications. It could secure sales records of dealers and loan records of museums. It could compile an inventory of public and private collections. It could trace pic-

tures to their present owners, and secure their history and physical data. It could build up a collection of photographs, perhaps in cooperation with the Frick Art Reference Library. It could correlate technical data such as types of canvas and pigments used in America. All of this would relieve scholars of an immense amount of time-consuming labor, leaving them free to use their eyes and knowledge in pure expertizing. It would transform scattered individual efforts into an organized cooperative undertaking. Nothing would so encourage scholars to devote themselves to American art as this kind of expert research assistance.

In contemporary art such an agency could fulfill an important function. There is no reason why the confusion that surrounds many of our older artists should extend to our contemporaries. They are alive and able to supply information. The bureau could select say fifty leading artists and with their assistance compile records of their work, with photographs. Such records, authenticated by the artists themselves, would be the surest safeguard against faking that one could conceive. They would make it impossible for the present unfortunate situation as to authenticity to arise again. And in a broader sense they would be a source of invaluable information for the future. How often has every biographer longed for just this kind of a record of his eminent subject!

It may be objected that contemporary judgment is unreliable and the fifty artists selected might not seem important

to posterity. It is true that many artists now prominent will not be so in fifty years, and that some now unknown will be famous. But this does not mean that all of today's prominent figures are going to be forgotten or that only the unknowns will be remembered. That contemporary taste is sometimes wrong does not mean that it is never right. If we go back fifty years and ask what artists then living and considered important are still so considered, we would include Inness, Whistler, LaFarge, Homer, Martin, Wyant, Chase, Duveneck, Sargent, St. Gaudens — a list which includes most of those now rated in the first rank. Only the highly personal romanticists Ryder and Blakelock and the uncompromising realist Eakins were relatively obscure, and even they had a limited following and before they died, achieved general recognition. Of course, there were other names admired at the time who have not survived. In other words, although we might include in our fifty artists some who would be of minor importance in the future, we should be very likely to include practically all those of lasting fame — even though we might have to add some in their old age.

Here is a case where scholarship would be not what it is popularly supposed to be, concerned exclusively with the past, but playing a part in the creative processes of our own time and country. In the long run this function of the bureau would be of even greater importance than its work on older art.

Not the least important service that such a bureau could

perform would be to make the public, collectors, museums and dealers realize that there are problems of authenticity in American art no less than in older fields, and that a central agency exists to deal with them. At present people do not know to whom to turn for authoritative opinions on American art. An agency of this kind, backed by the prestige of the museums, would soon become recognized as the highest court for authentication or attribution, and a central source of accurate information on American art. The moral effect would be extremely healthy. It would assist as nothing else would in the growth of the kind of scholarship we need if our scholars are to keep pace with our artists.

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